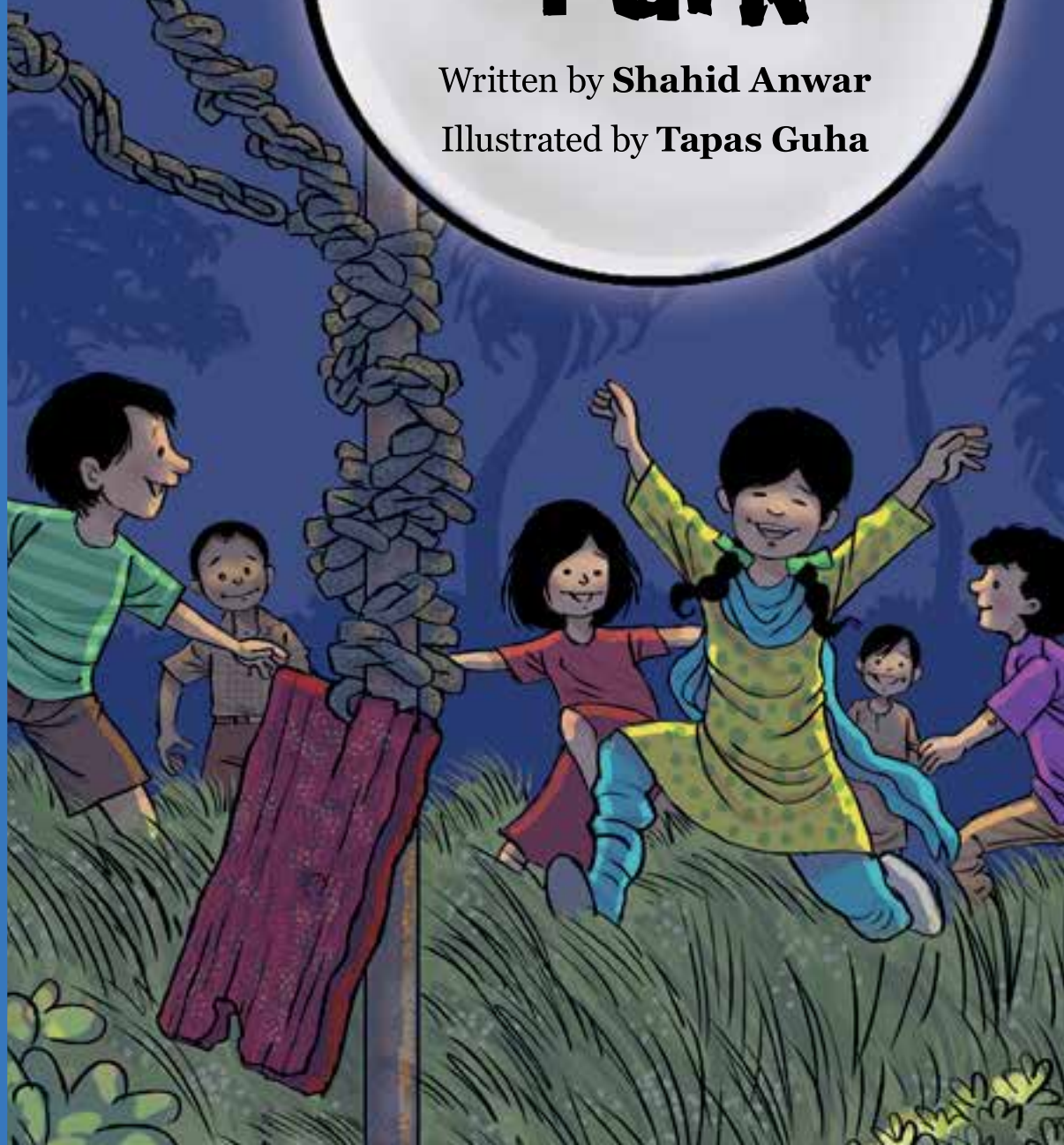




Badshahi Park

Written by **Shahid Anwar**

Illustrated by **Tapas Guha**



Original Story in Urdu '**Badshahi Park**' by Shahid Anwar

Illustrations: Tapas Guha

'Badshahi Park' — English Translation from Hindi by Pragya Gopinath

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It was the final round of hide-and-seek. The children were so involved in the game, they did not even realize that they had crossed the old lane. Now they were in Badshahi Park. This park was royal only in name. It had no pomp and even lacked the greenery of a park. The only plants was the knee-high grass which had not been taken care of since long.

Once upon a time, there must have been flowering plants which had withered waiting for water after the last tap broke. The swings were so wobbly that they had been wrapped around their posts. The slide was in such a state that the ladder had only two steps remaining, and the metal had so many holes that if your clothes got caught, you would only leave with bloody cuts. And the merry-go-round... so rusty that it rarely spun, and if you managed to make it turn, it made such a racket that the children would get scared and hop off.

So, Badshahi Park did not give children much joy. It was useful only for scaring them. If a child ever demanded to go out with his Papa, Papa cleverly said, "All right, let's go to Badshahi Park." The child would lose his enthusiasm instantly.

The only special feature in Badshahi Park was the small tomb in its centre. The tomb was in ruins, and none of its walls was in good condition. In spite of this, the children of the neighbourhood would come in the evening to play in the park. There was no one there to stop them or scold them.

The dome, verandah and staircase were all covered in pigeons' droppings, as if the birds disliked the colours of the tomb and had decided to paint it differently.

Inside the tomb was a long grave which had worn out over time and now looked like a crouching hunchback. It is said that the king who lay in that grave was very cruel. Reading and writing was forbidden in his kingdom. He thought that if his people were educated they would overthrow him. This is why his kingdom had neither schools nor libraries. If books were found in any home, it was burnt down.

In that kingdom lived a wise man who was known around the world. People came from far and wide to listen to him speak. The evil king could not stand the wise man, but he could not dare to harm him. The man was loved by many. The king waited for an opportunity and finally, one day he hung the wise man on a false charge of theft.





The wise man was hanged on a full moon night. It is said that even after killing the wise man, the king was not content. He developed phantom pains in his neck, and he would often clutch at his throat for no apparent reason.

On full moon nights, his lunacy would take another hue. He used to take any rope he saw and make a noose around his neck. It

took a lot of policing by the guards to save his life. One day, they were not around and the king took his own life. It was a full moon night.

People say that the king did not find peace even after death. His madness continued in the grave. On full moon nights, the king rises from his grave and roams around his tomb. If anyone walks by, the ghost shouts, “I want a rope, I want a rope!” Usually the unfortunate traveller faints and falls to the ground. This is why people mostly stay away from Badshahi Park.

It was dusk and the children were creating a ruckus in the park. It was Zulfi's turn to be the den. He covered both eyes with his palms and loudly counted...one...two...three...

Behind him the other children ran around finding spots to hide.

...six...seven...eight...

Soon the children had hidden in different places. Only Ashhar had not found a corner yet.

...nine...

Ashhar had only one option left—the tomb.

...ten!

As Zulfi finished counting, Ashhar leapt. Straight into the tomb! But Zulfi had seen him jump. He yelled from where he stood, “No Ashhar! Not there!”





Zulfi's voice was filled with such fear that Ashhar could not stay there. He emerged immediately and looked at Zulfi with surprise.

“What happened? Why did you yell?”

“You shouldn’t hide in the tomb.”

“Why, what’s over there?”

“There’s a grave! A king’s grave.”

“So what?”

“Don’t you know what happens on full moon nights?”

Hearing this, Ashhar started laughing. Zulfi did not understand what was so funny. His face fell. Seeing his expression, Ashhar laughed even harder. He called all the children.

“Pinky...Kaasni...Sheela...Dharma...Badkoo...come out. Who wants to play with this scaredy-cat? Come here now!”

The children did not know what the matter was. They all came running out.



“Oh! Why are you two fighting?” they asked.

“Who will play with him!” Ashhar pointed at Zulfi and burst into laughter again.

“Why, what happened?” Kaasni came forward.

“He says not to go into the tomb. He says someone will grab me.”

“Well, Zulfi is right!” said Kaasni. Her support lifted Zulfi’s spirits a little.

“You don’t know what is over there?” Sheela asked, taking Zulfi’s side.

“Arrey, if Ashhar wants to hide there, let him. Why are you getting bothered?” Badkoo intervened. “If he hides in the tomb someone else will have to go find him. Who will enter the tomb... near the grave?” said Sheela.

Before anybody could answer, Ashhar exploded, “You are all scaredy-cats...like little mice. I don’t want to play with you.”

None of the children liked being yelled at in this way. Zulfi saw that most of his friends were on his side and his confidence grew.

He locked eyes with Ashhar and said, “You think you’re so brave?”

“I don't just think so. I *am* brave,” Ashhar retorted.

“Can you go into the tomb at night?”

“Of course, I can.”

“Even on a full moon night?”

“Even on a full moon night!”

“Even till the headstone of the grave?”

“Yes, even till the headstone of the grave!”

“Then it is decided that on the next full moon night you will go into the tomb and come out after hammering a nail into the headstone of the grave.”

“I accept, go on.”

“If you win, we will give you a ball and a cricket bat. And if you lose?”

“That will never happen, so there is no need to think about it,” Ashhar bragged. Everyone knew that he was very boastful, so they kept quiet.

The problem now was finding out which night would be a full moon night. Kaasni gestured at the sky. Everyone’s eyes turned upwards. There, a round-faced moon was smiling. Tonight was the night!



“Okay! Tonight it is,” Ashhar said with confidence. “But who will bring the hammer and nail?”

“I will get it.” Zulfi was not going to let this opportunity slip through his fingers.

“All right, lets meet at night...over here...at ten o’ clock sharp!” Ashhar tramped through the grass and went home. The other children returned too.

At ten o’ clock that night, the moon was shining as if someone had stuck a silvery bindi on the forehead of the blue sky. Ashhar kept checking the clock. His patience was just about to break when the clock struck ten. He peeped into the drawing room. Everyone had gone to their rooms. Only his brother was sitting in front of the TV, and he was so absorbed in watching ‘Comedy Circus’ that he did not even register what was happening behind his back.

Ashhar quietly shut the door to his room and tiptoed outside. As soon as he crossed the front door, he sprinted towards Badshahi Park. Zulfi was waiting at the broken gate of the park. Ashhar looked around as he caught his breath. There was not another soul in the park or even outside it.

“Did you bring the nail?” Ashhar panted. Zulfi handed over the nail carefully. “And the hammer?” The hammer, wrapped in newspaper, was in front of him too. “Now you wait here. I will be back in the blink of an eye,” said Ashhar, dumping the newspaper on the ground.

Holding the nail in one hand and the hammer in the other, Ashhar entered the gate. The long grass inside was bathed in the moon’s silvery sheen. The swings, merry-go-round and slide were all bathed in moonlight. Everything looked strange, like it had come from another world, a fairy land. Ashhar looked at the tomb and was shocked. The dome was present, but the building’s foundation had disappeared. It looked as if the whole tomb was floating in the air. Ashhar stopped short. He blinked a few times and looked the tomb over, then laughed at himself. The foundation was still there. It was a trick of the moonlight. It was lighting different corners of the building differently. Ashhar took a step forward...

Now he was near the tomb. The moonlight filtered through the grills of the small windows and fell in rays on the grave. The tomb was silvery too. As Ashhar took a step in the verandah, he felt as if the grave was turning.



He began trembling from head to toe. He tried to gather his courage and take another step. But what was this...his other foot was frozen in place. It remained stuck to the ground. When he pulled his leg...**thwack!** His slipper broke. He felt that now misfortune was really about to fall on him. He should not have taken on this challenge. For a second this thought crossed his mind but he quickly pushed it away and picked up his broken slipper. It was covered in sticky droppings and he threw away both his slippers in irritation and went up to the verandah.

When he peered in he felt as if the grave had turned again. He felt real fear in the pit of his stomach. He rubbed his eyes and began to sputter. After gathering his wits, he opened his eyes... inside the grave lay unmoving, the same as before. It had not turned left or right.

His heart thudded loudly. He was not the same Ashhar his friends knew. 'This silly bet...' once again the same thought. He glanced once at the hammer and nail in his hands and moved forward swiftly.

Reaching the tomb, he looked in every corner of the room. Patches and pockets of moonlight were scattered all over. He looked at the roof... Arrey, what is this?

A huge black cloud was hovering near the ceiling. As soon as Ashhar's gaze fell on it, the mass moved towards him with the speed of a missile. One...two...three...the cloud changed into many large spots in the air.

Before Ashhar could react, his head received many slaps as the bats descended on him. He fell down at the head of the grave... and the bats hung from the other side of the ceiling. Ashhar was terrified now.

'If I lose a moment now...' Instead of finishing the thought, Ashhar held the nail at the head of the grave and struck it with the hammer. His hand was shaking, and so the hammer did not hit the nail properly. He tried once more... **thak!** The sound was so loud that he was startled...the nail was in the ground. Ashhar was relieved. He jumped to his feet but he could not get up.

'Dham'... he fell on the floor as if someone had pulled the back of his shirt. He tried harder, but he was pulled down again so hard that he hit his head.

Gathering his remaining strength, he tried to get up again but was dragged to the floor. 'Is the tomb pulling me?' he thought when suddenly his hands and feet went cold. The tomb began spinning around. The walls closed in on Ashhar...faster...and faster...

Before fainting he heard a voice whispering, "Rope! I want a rope." He did not remember anything after that point.





When Ashhar opened his eyes he found himself back home. The house was full of people. Everyone was staring at him.

Seeing his eyelids move, Zulfi touched his forehead and said, “Nothing happened yaar! You had only nailed your shirt to the ground...in the tomb...maybe you got scared!” Everyone burst out laughing and Ashhar closed his eyes, deeply embarrassed.

“Look, this is for you,” said Zulfi. Ashhar opened his eyes and saw a brand new bat in Zulfi’s hands. Ashhar looked at him in surprise.

“We all knew that you would go there and win the bet, too. So what if a few things did not go as planned? Here, take this bat.”

Ashhar closed his eyes again...but this time, to thank his friends!



Read India

Pratham Books was set up in 2004, as part of the Read India movement, a nation-wide campaign to promote reading among children. Pratham Books is a not-for-profit organization that publishes quality books for children in multiple Indian languages. Our mission is to see "a book in every child's hand" and democratize the joy of reading. If you would like to contribute to our mission, please email us at info@prathambooks.org.



Shahid Anwar is an author, playwright and a translator who writes both in Urdu and Hindi. Known for his powerful but simple style, his plays have been performed across the country. His successful plays include *Ghair Zaroori Log*, *Soopna Ka Sapna* and *Hamare Waqt Mein*. Shahid has received many accolades for his outstanding work in the field of drama including the Mohan Rakesh Samman, Ghalib Award and Delhi Urdu Academy's Drama Award. Shahid lives in Delhi.



Tapas Guha is a well known illustrator for children. What he likes best is illustrating comics and animal stories. His work has appeared extensively in books published by Pratham Books, Puffin, Scholastic, Rupa and Oxford University Press.

It was forbidden to go there, and to go at night to hammer a nail at the head of the grave? Ashhar was either a fool, or he was trying to be oh-so-brave. Why else would he accept Zulfi's challenge? Would Ashhar enter the haunted tomb on a full moon night?

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